Real-Time History: Engaging with Living Archives and Temporal Multiplicities

International conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, March 19-21, 2025, co-sponsored by the GHI, the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C^2DH), the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM), Chair for Digital History at Humboldt University zu Berlin (HUB), NFDI 4Memory, and the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe. Sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

Conveners: Daniel Burckhardt (GHI Washington), Simon Donig (Herder Institute), Jana Dunz-Keck (GHI Washington), Andreas Fickers (C^2DH), Peter Haslinger (Herder Institute), Katharina Hering (GHI Washington), Torsten Hiltmann (Humboldt University), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Lincoln Mullen (RRCHNM), Atiba Pertilla (GHI Washington), Tabitha Redepenning (Herder Institute), Lauren Rever (GHI Washington/RRCHNM). Participants: Ian Milligan (University of Waterloo), Sheila Brennan (NEH), Douglas Peach (Library of Congress), Jason Steinhauer (History Communication Institute), Thorsten Wübbena (Leibniz Institute of European History), Karl Blumenthal (Internet Archive), Amanda Burgess (Macquarie University/ Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture), Merle Ingenfeld (University of Bonn), Niro Kandasamy (University of Sydney), Ursula Lehmkuhl (University of Trier), Ian Marino (Leibniz Institute of European History), Michael McDonnell (University of Sydney), Isaac Meth (Syracuse University), Sebastian Modrow (Syracuse University), Enrico Natale (Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences), Taras Nazaruk (Center for Urban History, Lviv),

Yael Netzer (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Thiago Nicodemo (University of Campinas/São Paulo State Archives), Natalia Otrishchenko (Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, Lviv), Joana Vieira Paulino (Institute of Contemporary History, Lisbon), LaShawnDa Pittman (University of Washington), Bella Ruhl (New York University), Sapir Sluzker Amran (Ezrahion) Adetola Elizabeth Umoh (University of Kwazulu-Natal), Machteld Venken (C^{2}DH), Christian Wachter (Bielefeld University), Bradley Wiles (Northern Illinois University), and guest Jery Huntley (OurStoryBridge Inc.).

The Seventh Conference on Digital Humanities and Digital History at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC revolved around concepts of "living archives" and questions related to making history in real time. One focus was on current and past initiatives documenting the "now" by creating rapid response collections and archives, facilitated by digital technology, which frequently blur lines between grassroots documentation and archiving, academic historical and sociological research, and civic engagement and activism. The varied conference program included a keynote, workshops, panel discussions, and a creative group activity, as well as many inspiring, collegial conversations. Over three days, participants from four continents discussed ethical, legal, technical, historical, and philosophical questions while sharing experiences with developing collections and archives documenting recent events.

After welcomes from conveners Simone Lässig and Andreas Fickers, the conference opened with the panel "Trauma in Time: Documenting Terror in Living Archives." In her presentation Amanda Burgess presented her dissertation research on the *9/11 Memorial & Museum Instagram* geo-tag as a living, user-generated archive, based on a hand-curated corpus of 500+ posts. She emphasized both the par-

ticipatory power of these posts and silences they produce, prompting discussion of methods and ethics, including use without explicit consent. Bradley Wiles reflected on curating the 2008 Northern Illinois University mass-shooting collection (websites, media, ephemera) in his presentation. While deeply meaningful to donors and families, he noted limited scholarly and public use and raised practical questions about audiences, ethical access, and strategies for activation—e.g., fellowships, artist residencies, and other plans for events planned for the 20th anniversary of the crime in 2028. The discussion addressed methodological and ethical questions about using Instagram posts without the explicit consent of users, and the importance of following ethics guidelines, such as those developed by the Association of Internet Researchers and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

The evening keynote by Ian Milligan examined the *September 11 Digital Archive,* created in 2001 by RRCHNM (George Mason University), and the *American Social History Project* (CUNY), framing them as both inspiration and cautionary tales for event-based archives. He detailed research hurdles, such as non-standard metadata, mixed file formats, time-zone inconsistencies, and a weak interface, and described data cleaning and reorganizing message-board content. Milligan underscored privacy and consent issues, including hateful content posted on message boards, and argued that beyond documenting collective experiences of 9/11, the archive is a vital source for studying early-internet misinformation, racism, and xenophobia. His takeaway: rapid-response collections must prioritize sustainable, standardized metadata and clear ethics/privacy protocols from the start.

The second day opened with a hands-on workshop facilitated by Karl Blumenthal on the *Archives Research Compute*

Hub (ARCH), an IMLS-supported, open-source platform for building research collections and generating analyzable datasets. Blumenthal introduced web-archiving fundamentals and demonstrated how ARCH supports open publication/preservation of user-generated datasets and classroom use, using COVID-19 rapid-response collecting to show data harvesting and cleanup workflows. Discussion centered on research/teaching applications and collaboration opportunities with the Internet Archive.

The first panel of this day, began with a presentation on Russia's war in Ukraine by *LivArch*, a consortium project supporting ethical, sustainable, decentralized community archives documenting the war. Taras Nazaruk outlined their participatory model encompassing 200+ community collections—from Telegram chats and social media to geo-referenced satellite images and oral histories—showcased at MostDocumentedWar.org. Simon Donig, Tabitha Redepenning, Taras Nazaruk, and Peter Haslinger emphasized ethical care-based metadata, distributed infrastructure, training, and artist/scholar engagement, alongside challenges of sensitive data across jurisdictions, collection incompleteness, power asymmetries, misinformation, and retraumatization. In the Q&A, panelists framed collecting as part of community resistance; the project deliberately centers Ukrainian perspectives and depends on democratic conditions to sustain it. A key takeaway was the need to document project decisions, resource asymmetries, and ethical/legal reasoning as integral to rapid-response work.

The afternoon panel began with Joana Vieira Paulino's presentation on the Lisbon DH Lab's participatory Omeka-based workflow featuring two examples: *Memória Covid* (multi-format citizen testimonies) and *Memórias de Servidão* (memories of domestic servants and hotel workers), both designed to be inclusive and accessible for

contributors and users alike. Next, Machteld Venken and Natalia Otrishchenko in their presentation described follow-up interviews with displaced Ukrainians that led to participant-defined sensitivity metadata enabling layered access, aligning with—yet extending beyond—GDPR constraints. Sebastian Modrow and Isaac Meth then outlined plans for a 10th Mountain Division community archive (post-1985 reactivation) in their presentation, posing design questions about multi-format ingestion, community representation, epistemic justice, and platform choices for co-curation. While entering uncharted territory for collaborative military archiving is a challenge, it also offers an opportunity to develop a model that similar projects can build on.

The final panel, titled "Dynamic Memory: Theoretical Frontiers of Living Archives," opened with Ian Marino's presentation, in which he surveyed the landscape of digital archives and collections documenting COVID-19 experiences in Latin America. Marino highlighted that little knowledge and systematic analyses exist about the nature and dynamics of the landscape of digital archives and collections documenting COVID-19 experiences in Latin America as a global, yet very local grassroots phenomenon. What are useful theoretical frameworks for such initiatives? How helpful are existing frameworks and terminologies, including the terms "living archives," "rapid response collections," or "digital informal archives?" Marino questioned the implications of the term "living archives," also used in this conference's title, which establishes an implicit and misleading contrast to "dead archives." As a conceptual alternative, he suggested the term "disruptive archives." The term captures that these archives not only document disruptive events and developments (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) but that they also empower communities to preserve their own histories and experiences, while challenging and disrupting established narratives, including in countries with colo-

nialist pasts. Merle Ingenfeld examined virtual humans (photorealistic digital twins) as emotionally compelling yet ethically fraught tools for research and education—raising ethical, historical, and legal issues of ownership, consent, and the risks of reanimating problematic historical figures. In his presentation on hypertextual historiography, Christian Wachter suggested valuing hypertext as a format that does justice to the multi-vocal and multi-temporal diversity of narratives in rapid response archives and collections. Examples for hypertext presentations are Shazad Bahir's 2022 online publication *Islamic Pasts and Futures*, which demonstrates Islam as a discursive network structured by different, yet complementary, temporalities, and Fernand Braudel's 1949 *The Mediterranean*, a hypertext publication *avant la lettre*. The discussion probed terminology of living archives (disruptive vs. lifecycle framings emphasizing continuity), platform sustainability, and the ethics of virtual reenactment. The day concluded with a zine-making session led by Lauren Rever—designed as a moment to decompress from the day's focus on war, trauma, and pandemics. Participants created personal zines, e.g., on defining a living archive or sharing accomplishments, which were later displayed in the hallway.

The third day of the conference kicked off with a collaborative workshop. Yael Netzer presented *Edut 710*, launched on October 9, 2023, by a volunteer collective to record testimonies from those directly affected by the October 7 attacks. The team designed emergency-ready, tool-agnostic workflows (with tables and participatory metadata) to preserve personal stories under rigorous ethical, legal, and technical standards. Sapir Sluzker Amran introduced *Mizrahion: The People's Archive for Social Struggles in Israel/Palestine* (2018), a grassroots initiative documenting human-rights activism—especially Mizrahi, LGBTQI+, feminist, and free-expression movements—through participatory curation,

crowdsourced metadata, and innovations such as QR code uploads at protests and "adopting" legacy collections. Discussion addressed relations to state institutions: While *Edut 710* collaborates with the National Library of Israel, *Mizrahion* relies on community trust outside state frameworks.

The first panel of the day featured LaShawnDa Pittman, who introduced the *Black Grandmother Archive* and *Black Grandmother Worldmaking Library*. These community-driven projects preserve grandmothers' knowledge and histories—especially amid displacement in Seattle's Central District and along the Gullah Geechee Corridor—by enabling contributors to upload stories and metadata, repair harms from systemic discrimination, and reclaim narrative authority. Bella Ruhl examined how mass digitization circulates anonymous vernacular photographs of cross-dressing and "historical lesbians" (c. 1900–1970) with scant context, inviting present-day projections by visitors. She highlighted curatorial strategies that prompt critical reflection (e.g., a *Schwules Museum Berlin* online exhibition) and called for stronger digital archival literacies and ethical stewardship. The discussion revolved around the topic of emotion in research, ethical stewardship of online projects, archives and collections, and the need to develop digital collection literacy in academic and public settings.

In the second panel, Ursula Lehmkuhl analyzed commercial genealogy platforms—especially *Ancestry*—as de facto "living archives": powerful yet problematic due to opaque, location-sensitive algorithms, unstable results, and inaccurate conflation of biographical information from different persons. She urged to develop critically framed user guides and reaffirmed the need for traditional archival/historical verification. Niro Kandasamy and Michael McDonnell reported on participatory action research with Indigenous activists and community workers in Sydney, showing how par-

ticipatory action research (PAR) methods—oral histories, care, and participant control—advance self-determination and address epistemic injustice in histories of communities shaped by colonialism and forced migration. Topics of discussion included developing digital source literacy for analyzing materials from commercial databases and sustainable strategies for encouraging partnerships for participatory community-based scholarship and activism.

In the final panel, titled "Healing Histories: Living Archives of Pandemics and Epidemics," Adetola Elizabeth Umoh discussed *South African Voices: Towards a Museum of HIV Memory and Learning* (2016), a community-anchored archive collecting narratives and artifacts amid one of the world's highest HIV/AIDS burdens, while flagging gaps in long-term digital preservation. Enrico Natale analyzed *corona-memory.ch* (2020–2022), exploring research uses (memorialization, misinformation, personal experience) and noting metadata deficiencies that hinder interpretation. Concluding the panel, Thiago Nicodemo presented *Coronarchive/Coronarquivo* (Brazil), a meta-project monitoring Latin American COVID-19 archives across institutions and communities—including Indigenous and marginalized groups—and linking documentation to memorialization and accountability after 700,000+ deaths in Brazil. As director of the São Paulo State Archives, he argued for state–community partnerships, a shared theoretical framework for "living/informal" archives, and sustaining communities of practice to exchange methods, materials, and lessons.

The conference ended with remarks by the conveners. Peter Haslinger highlighted four crosscutting themes that were addressed during the conference: the work's layered temporalities (historical, biographical, digital); the precarity and asymmetries of data collection and risks of misuse; archives' evolving socio-historical roles—including forensic

functions; and the ways AI can crystallize counter-world perspectives. Torsten Hiltmann emphasized examining the social practices of living archives and reintroduced digitality as a force shaping archival and everyday life. He underscored data culture, resilience, and the role of archives in processing trauma, negotiating identity, and enabling immediate documentation—often serving present communities as much as (or more than) historians. Andreas Fickers noted the situational diversity of knowledge work across regions, the civic dimensions of archival practice, and shifting researcher identities. Above all, he urged rigorous process documentation—the "how" and "what for" of projects—as crucial for future usability, alongside preparedness for crises such as climate change. Simone Lässig concluded the discussion by pointing to dependencies on commercial platforms and waning trust in institutions as unexpected but significant themes, while praising the energy and innovation on display.

Bringing together scholars, archivists, and community organizers from four continents, the conference crystallized "living archives" as ethically grounded, methodologically inventive infrastructures for documenting crises and everyday life in real time. The conference underscored that we live in an age of data abundance, yet preservation is not automatic: it requires collaborative and active engagement in real-time archiving in the preservation of critical sources and infrastructures by scholars, community activists, archivists, and other information professionals alike. With no guarantee that platforms or even national libraries will provide enduring access, the future of contemporary scholarly analysis depends on preserving and developing open, sustainable pathways now. Participants left with shared practices—rigorous process documentation, participatory metadata, and state–community partnerships—poised to strengthen resilient, trustworthy public memory. In the con-

ference's collaborative spirit, participants compiled community notes and launched a public Zotero group bibliography on living archives for ongoing shared reference.

Jana Dunz-Keck, Joris Figaj, Katharina Hering, Sofie Kassel, Moritz Menke, Lauren Rever
(GHI Washington)